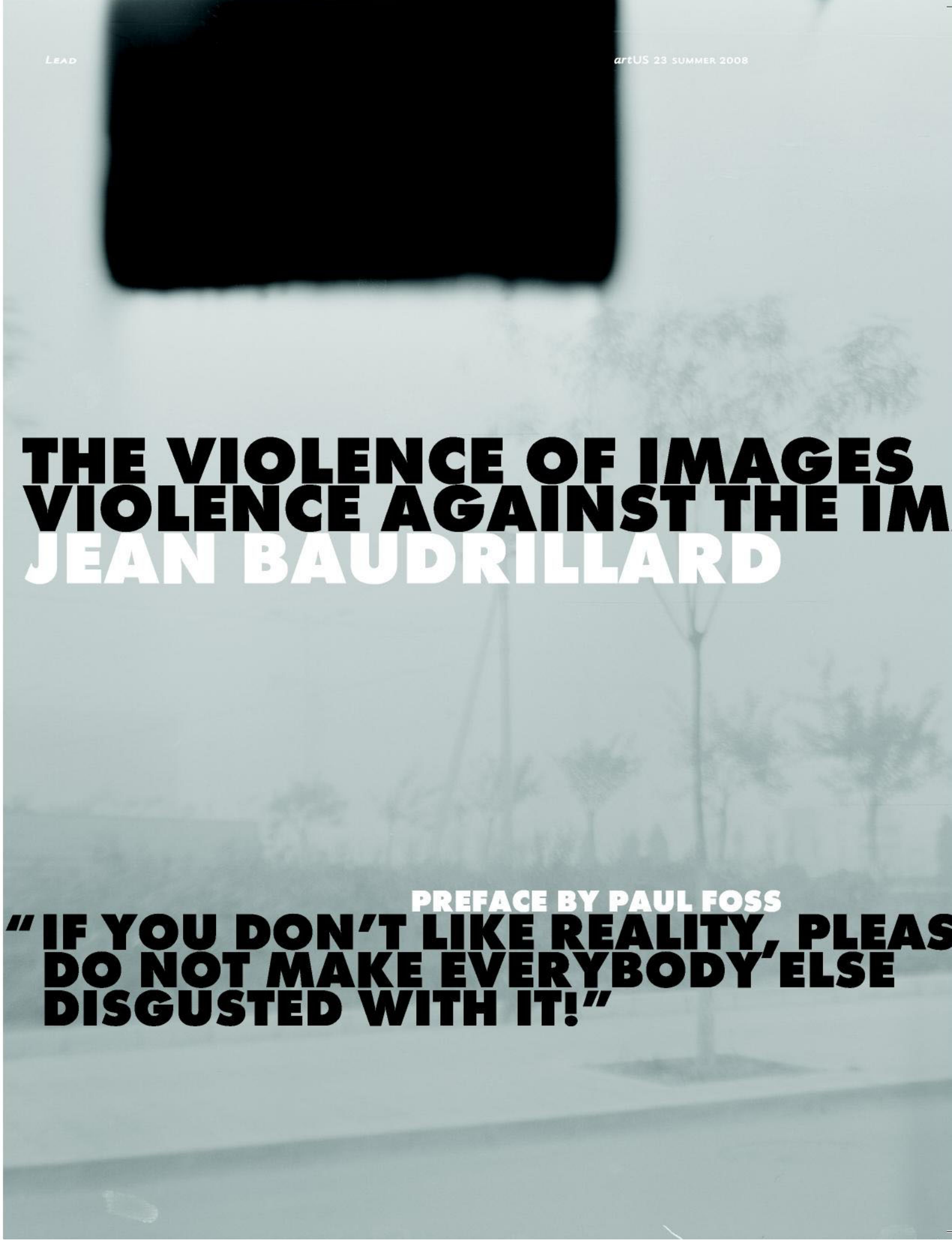


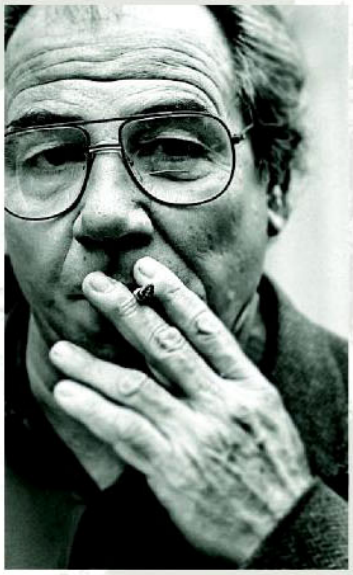
THE VIOLENCE OF IMAGES
VIOLENCE AGAINST THE IM

JEAN BAUDRILLARD

PREFACE BY PAUL FOSS

"IF YOU DON'T LIKE REALITY, PLEAS DO NOT MAKE EVERYBODY ELSE DISGUSTED WITH IT!"

PREFACE: "IF YOU DON'T LIKE REALITY, PLEASE DO NOT MAKE EVERYBODY ELSE DISGUSTED WITH IT!"



"Violence de L'image, 'Violence Faite À L'image'," appearing here in English translation for the first time, is a paper Jean Baudrillard was originally commissioned to present at the International Symposium attached to "media_city," Seoul's 2002 Biennial (the directors of the symposium were Sung-Hee Kim and Nancy Barton). Slated for later publication, these plans were disrupted when Baudrillard died on March 6, 2007—"following a long illness," said the NY Times, but the Wikipedia entry mentions "typhoid" (and rumors have circulated about prostate cancer[1]). The text therefore fell into a kind of posthumous limbo. Other cuts of the same essay abound: just to mention some entries in the European Graduate School's online library (www.egs.edu/Baudrillard), there is "The Violence of the Image" (n.d.), "Dust Breeding" (CTheory, 2001), "Photography, or The Writing of Light" (CTheory, 2000), and "Photographies: For Illusion Isn't the Opposite of Reality..." (n.d.). There is even a YouTube video of Baudrillard reading an English translation of extracts from the "same" piece at the EGS in 2004. But a lot of the sentiments and phraseology contained in the present text are sprinkled throughout The Transparency of Evil (1990), The Illusion of the End (1992), The Perfect Crime (1995), Impossible Exchange (1999), and The Vital Illusion (2000).

1. In fact, Jean Baudrillard died of cancer, after a long remission.

Baudrillard's symposium manuscript was the basis for this translation. It stands out immediately on a number of scores: his typical, carefully constructed spread of odd paragraphs and spacing, creating the impression of sudden shifts in stress and intonation—the poet's standard tools. Then there is his singular style of homegrown terminology, whose full resonance in French fails to find a sympathetic English ear: "singularité," for instance (such as "the singularity of ... thought, the singularity of being a single event, similar in a sense to the singularity of the world through which it is made into an event" ["Radical Thought," 1994]), and "transparition," which despite a certain currency in academic and online vanity circles, resists pinning down (meaning, as it does, the fleeting apparition or shining through of things). Last but not least is Baudrillard's habit of using cryptic shorthand when deploying his references: in this essay, it is hard to tell whether "Big Brother" refers to George Orwell's dictator in 1984 or he popular U.S. reality show where contestants, locked in an apartment with round-the-clock surveillance cameras, get to be evicted by viewers' call-in votes (whereas a certain rigor remains possible in Baudrillard's stark orthography, it doesn't really make that much sense unless you are aware of the earlier references). The confusion gets compounded further in the discussion of Loft Story (the French and Canadian adaptation of Big Brother), where you just can't tell if it's the show or the current fad in downtown living. These shunts or switch words don't easily survive translation, but it helps, I think, to indicate in square brackets where some of the more tricky transitions lie. (One unavoidable insertion concerns Baudrillard's reference in the text to an obscure notebook entry by the eighteenth-century German scientist and epigramist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, an intimate of Kant and Goethe and the inventor, among other claims to fame, of the Xerox copy machine.)

My own connection to Baudrillard goes back to 1983, when I translated—along with Sydney philosopher Paul Patton—"The Precession of Simulacra" (published in Simulations [New York: Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series] and Art & Text [Melbourne, Australia]), followed the same year by In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities (Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series) and then, in 1990, the anthology Revenge of the Crystal (Sydney: Pluto Press/Power Institute). Perhaps ten or so other such translations have appeared under my name over the years. All this intimacy has naturally led to a certain reputation on my part, most pointedly at the level of supposed influence and idolatry, which I have largely rejected on the grounds that it confuses content with intent.[2] I originally got "into" Baudrillard to explore simulation in the contemporary sphere, but then was immediately struck by the power of his words to get under people's skin. Right from the beginning, I suspected that his critical ideas and unique writing style were a basic ruse to shake us out of our complacent thinking, especially in the post-Marxist left. I suspected that he was not to be taken literally. I suspected a Manichean lamb in wolf's clothing; a sensitive, withdrawn Stylite figure such as we find in Buñuel's Simon of the Desert (1965), living by choice atop a column of words of his own making. I suspected that the overt cynic and nihilist we call Baudrillard was a mere projection of postmodern ressentiment, the hostility directed at whoever presents himself as a likely target for frustration and assignment of blame. A role, mind you, that Baudrillard—the self-confessed progeny of "peasants," an academic outsider, "computer illiterate," and early translator of Bertolt Brecht and Peter Weiss (whose Marat/Sade and The Aesthetics of Resistance now appear tailor-made for understanding the philosopher's key strategy)—seems to have been "born" to play.

Baudrillard's seductively complex yet painstakingly machined series of critical assertions also amounts to something like the Third Temptation of Christ in the Wilderness, where the Devil tries to convince Jesus to free himself from

JEAN BAUDRILLARD, PUBLICITY PHOTOGRAPH.

a pinnacle by jumping off and relying on angels to break his fall—an appropriate allegory of radical thought's fall from grace after May 1968, in which the main inspiration for Baudrillard's oeuvre can be located. A sociology teacher at the Université Paris X-Nanterre during the late 1960s, he participated in the events of May 1968 when the French Communist Party on the whole failed to support the mostly student and shiftless rioters, the enragées. Thereafter Baudrillard's writings began to assume an increasingly provocative tone, and a marked shift away from his earlier Situationist-cum-Frankfurt School stance. In his 1973 "provocation," The Mirror of Production, he announced his divorce from classical Marxism, seeing it as little more than the naturalizing of capitalist society. After this fiery breach, Baudrillard's work turned more toward symbolic exchange, Bataille's notions of expenditure and excess, and a more Nietzschean, if "aristocratic" mode of address. As he explains,

> I have never forgiven culture, it contains too many unacceptable elements.... Everything has now turned into culture and it has even become very difficult to go beyond one's own culture since one finds it everywhere. There will even be a moment when one will not be able to find any deserts.

One comes across these words in "Vivisecting the 1990s," an interview published in CTheory in 1995 (and available online at the EGS website). Defending here what he describes as his "relativizing" vision of the world, that of "the end of the end," he also admits that, "I am quite aware that such a position is provocative, paradoxical, and ultimately unacceptable":

> I also believe it is a Stoic's duty, if there is one, not to sublimate, not to distance oneself, but to say that: such is the rule of the game and this is how I play it.... [But] I do recognize that such a position exposes itself to very serious charges.

In another interview—"Between Difference and Singularity" (an open discussion following his reading of "The Global and the Universal" in June 2002 at EGS)—he even claims,

> You are not dealing with the real Baudrillard. I have sent a clone. ... I say the most nihilistic things, yes, but the resolution of this pessimistic content is in a very glorious form ... you can describe the most apocalyptic system, but you can do it in a way that is not at all apocalyptic. ... It's always a duel.

Baudrillard sums up this agonistic, neo-anchoritic position perfectly in "Radical Thought," saying finally in answer to all those "good apostles" who continue to ask the difficult questions, "If you don't like reality, please do not make everybody else disgusted with it! ... You can never let people despair."

The real difficulty of reading and certainly translating Baudrillard is that, as poetic provocation, as "Stoic" equanimity in the face of strife and despair, as pure katalepsis, it resists clarification and rationalization. One can attempt this, of course. The general problem, however, has less to do with explication than simply drawing attention to the shimmering, "disillusioning" phantasia in the depths of Baudrillard's image-theory—the image as both the formal medium and exit point of theory. But there can be no confusion as to this singular feature in texts like "The Violence of Images, Violence Against the Image": not only do they literally perform themselves, flow out of their very form (the unique eloquence of Baudrillard's prose hangs seductively over the harsher undertones of any particular thought), but they in turn get deformed through the "objective" lens of constant synkatathesis, which is nothing more than the process of sifting through good and bad impressions—"so as to see distinctly," according to Marcus Aurelius, "what kind of a thing it is in its substance, in its nudity, in its complete entirety" (Meditations). Or is it the opposite of this, a radical abandonment of the eupatheia resulting from "correct judgment"? A kind of afterlife incineration of the classical Stoic cosmology of everything as "transmuted and diffused, assuming a fiery nature by being received into the Seminal Reason [logos spermatikos] of the Universe"? Perhaps even a transparent doctrine of adiaphora, or "things different"? Something like this seems to be the main operation in play here.

One would add, however, the obvious scissors-and-paste approach of a busy working critic on the run, an understandable stratagem for satisfying all the demand. But it simultaneously reveals a methodical and ruthless scrutiny of the very minutiae of his unruly system. It is this self-examination that lends a particular lambency to all of Baudrillard's lectures, podcasts, interviews, and books, yet it is also the ultimate impediment to rescuing their profundity from a fate of cosmic singularity. Whether it is from a fear of being tied down or, which is more likely, through the author's own shameless refusal of indifference, no one can say. No one can say if his life and death was the consummate act of a martyr or, as Canetti once remarked about the face of animals, it reveals some mirror reflection sniggering at us. "Defacing the currency" has a special meaning for all Cynics and Stoics (as well as for counterfeit Stoics), most especially in the practice of "possible solutions" or hypnomnemata. The old Platonic belief that all the world's physical and emotional problems are caused by the false perception of things, that "perhaps the world is having us on," sits at the heart of Baudrillard's puppet theater. Jarry-style pataphysics, or the science of "imaginary solutions," simply comes at the problem from the other direction, from deep within the mirror of impressions.

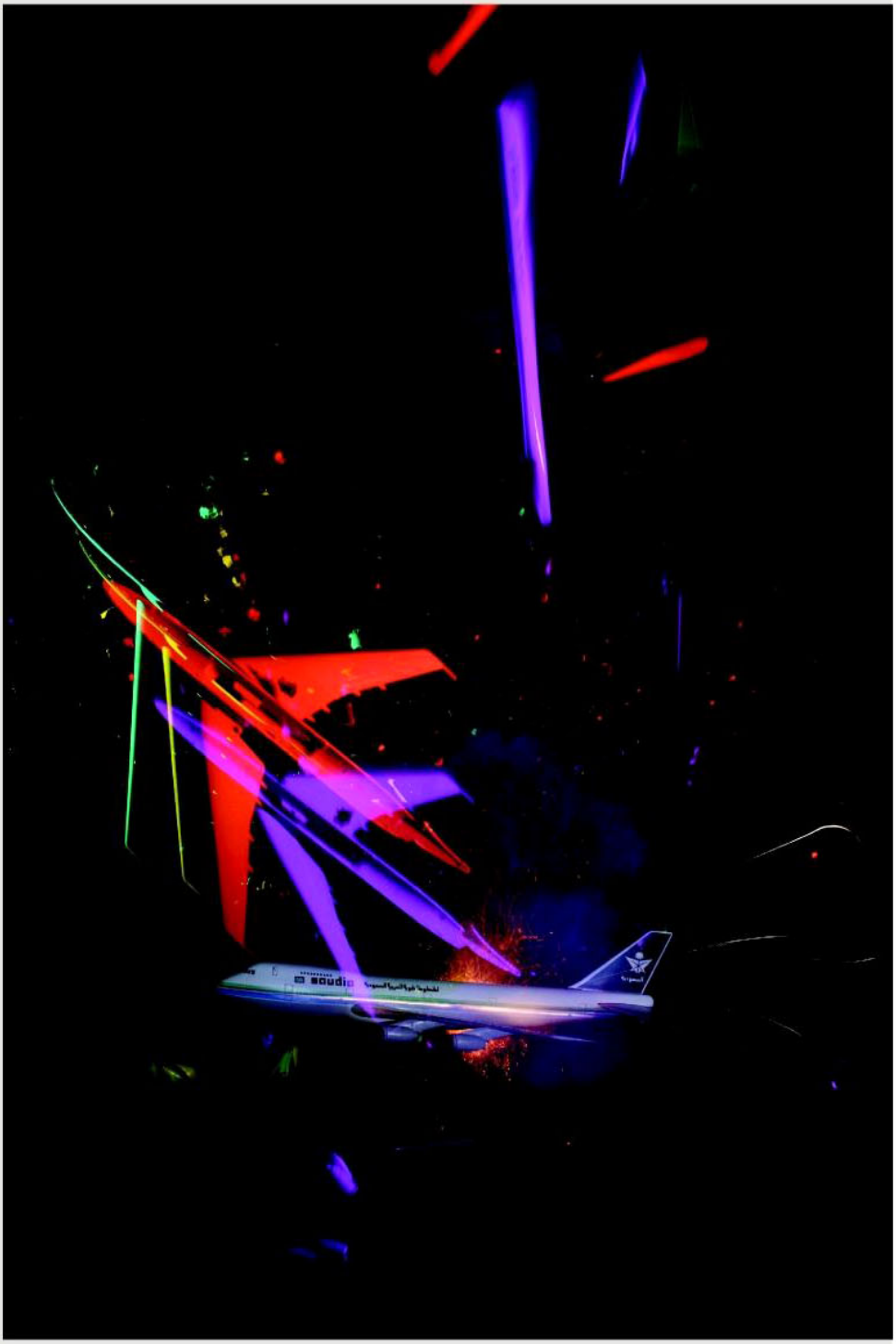
2. See my The &-Files: "Art & Text," 1981-2002 (forthcoming Whale and Star, 2009) for further comments along these lines.

Strolling again across the sulfurous terrain of Baudrillard's Stoa Poikile (theory as "the painted porch") leads me to the inescapable conclusion that here was a man not opposed to coming down off his perch if he felt like it, even if he sometimes refused to climb back up again. The man in a tub stops, goes back, adding and removing details, polishing and scrubbing. He never stops scrambling and de-scrambling his thoughts, like a Rubik's Cube. And a close reading of the following textual "ready-made" may provide a few extra clues to what one day will add up to a very different picture of The Man Who Was Baudrillard.

Paul Foss

THE VIOLENCE OF IMAGES, VIOLENCE AGAINST THE IMAGE

JEAN BAUDRILLARD



PATTERSON BECKWITH, *UNTITLED (SAUDIA STROBOGRAPH III, 20 μ X 5, 2008)*, 2008, C-PRINT, 16 X 20 IN.

We can point to a first form of violence: aggression, oppression, rape, the show of force, degradation, plunder. It is the unilateral violence of the strongest. The reverse of this would be historical, critical violence, the violence of rupture and transgression (as well as the violence of analysis, interpretation, meaning). Both are determinate forms of violence, with a beginning and an end, with identifiable causes and effects, and they correspond to a kind of transcendence, be it of power, history, or meaning.

Rather different is a strictly contemporary form of violence, a more subtle violence than aggression: the violence of deterrence, pacification, neutralization, verification [*contrôle*]. It is the violence of soft extermination. Therapeutic, genetic, information violence: the violence of consensus and forced intimacy, something like the plastic surgery of the social. The violence of transparency and docility, aimed at rooting out—through drugs, prophylaxis, psychic and media regulation—the very basis of evil, and thus all radicality. The violence of a system that tracks down all negativity, all singularity (including the ultimate singularity, death itself). The violence of a society in which, to all intents and purposes, negativity, conflict, even death are forbidden. The violence that somehow puts an end to violence, for which there can be no opposite or equal violence, unless it is pure hate. No more violence of the first kind, no more violence of the second kind, only violence of the third kind: the *Xerox degree of violence.*

This is predominantly the violence of information, the media, images, spectacle. The violence linked to transparency, to total visibility, to the disappearance of all secrecy. Even neuronal, biological, genetic violence: we may

soon discover the gene for revolt, perhaps even the gene for revolt against genetic engineering—a true biological hijacking, following which only the reprocessed or zombies will remain, all lobotomized as in *A Clockwork Orange*.

What we are facing today is virtual violence, the violent stripping away of the whole natural order, be it the body, sex, birth, or death. We should no longer speak of violence, but of virulence. This is violence of the viral kind, in the sense that it doesn't operate directly, but by contiguity, contagion, or chain reaction, aiming first and foremost at the loss of all our immunities. It is also viral in that, unlike negative violence, the classical violence of negation, it operates through an excess of positivity, just like the endless proliferation, excrescence, and metastasis of cancer cells. Between the virtual and the viral there is a profound complicity.

Our topic concerns the virulence of images and information. Not just violent content, but violence of the medium, violence inflicted on "real" violence, even to the point of canceling it out entirely.

When "the medium is the message" (MacLuhan), violence [as a medium] becomes its own message, a messenger of itself. So violence at the level of image content doesn't even bear comparison to the violence of the medium as such, of the medium as message, the violence ensuing from the fusion and confusion of medium and message. It is the same with the virus, which is a sort of information, but a very special kind: it is, simultaneously, the medium and the message. This explains its rampant proliferation, its infectious nature [*sa "virulence"*].

The whole problematic of violence is in fact superfluous, since virulence has now replaced and swept away violence. Traditional violence (the violence of alienation, opposition, domination) has not been resolved or made obsolete, but has simply disappeared to make room for something more violent than violence: virality or virulence. And whereas violence once had a (individual or collective) subject, there is no subject of virulence (of contamination or chain reaction). Classical violence was still haunted by the specter of Evil, which it could make appear and sometimes disappear. Our form of violence—virulence—only makes a mere show of evil, renders it see-through [*ne le fait plus que transparaître*]. It belongs to the order of transparency, and its logic is that of transparency: the Transparency of Evil.

The violence of images (and more generally the violence of information, or of the Virtual) is aimed at making the Real disappear. Everything must be seen, must become visible. The image is the paramount site of this visibility. All reality must become an image, but most of the time only at the cost of reality's disappearance. Furthermore, the source of the seduction or fascination of images (the fact that something in them has disappeared) is also the source

of their ambiguity—in particular, the ambiguity of using images for reporting, messages, statements. By conjuring up in the imagination even the most brutal kind of reality, the image loses its real substance.

It is somewhat like the myth of Eurydice: when Orpheus turns around to look at her, she vanishes into the Underworld. The marketing of images reveals the same total lack of concern with the real world. At the very limit, the real world becomes a useless function, a collection of ghostly forms and events. We are not far from the shadows on the walls of Plato's cave.

A good example of this forced visibility, where (hypothetically) everything is meant to be seen, is *Big Brother* and all the other TV reality shows, etc. It reveals that when everything is there to be seen, we realize there is nothing left to see. It is the mirror of platitude, of the zero degree. It reveals our synthetic or virtual sociality, on which the disappearance of the other is blatantly reflected (even though the show claims different objectives), as well as the possibility that human beings are fundamentally not social beings.

It also reveals the fact that the [Orwellian] myth of *Big Brother*, that of the total policing of visibility, has now been

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taken over by the public itself, mobilized as both witness and judge. The public has become *Big Brother.*

We are far from the Panopticon, where visibility equals power and control. From now on, it is no longer a question of rendering things visible to the naked eye, but of making them transparent to themselves, thus destroying the need for inspection [*contrôle*] and even the inspector. It is as if the controlling power had become internalized, and human beings, no longer victims of images, were inexorably transformed into images themselves: as if we are now only two-dimensional, only skin-deep.

In other words, humans have become instantly legible, overexposed in the light of information and everywhere urged to produce and express themselves. "Self-expression is the ultimate form of confession" (Foucault).

To become an image lays bare the whole of existence, all our misfortunes, desires, prospects. There are no secrets left, just endless talk and communicating. Such is the profound violence of the image: the violence against depth, against the singular being, against secrecy. It is also the violence against language, which at that juncture loses its originality. Language becomes nothing more than a medium, an operator of visibility. It loses its ironic dimension, its dimension of play and distance, its autonomous symbolism, to the extent that language becomes more important than what it means.

The image is also more important than what it means, which is something we tend to forget, and which also explains the violence against the image.

What we see operating in *Big Brother* is virtual reality, a synthetic image of reality, but one circuitously transposed to so-called "everyday life," which is already trumped by all the dominant models. Does that mean it's pornographic voyeurism? Not at all. What people desire is not really sex, but the spectacle of banality, which is today's true porn or obscenity: the obscenity of platitude, insignificance, nullity. It is a sort of parody in reverse of Artaud's Theater of Cruelty.

But perhaps there is a no less virtual form of cruelty. At a time when we rarely get to see images of actual world events on TV, it is the image of everyday life, of existential banality that ends up becoming the most heinous or violent event, the very location of the Perfect Crime. And that's what it is. People are fascinated (but terrified at the same time) by the indifference of doing and saying Nothing, by the indifference of the Same, the indifference of their very own existence.

Gone is the metaphysics of sex and crime. What we have instead is a pataphysics of the perfect crime, the assumption of banality as destiny, as the new face of fatality: a counter-transference illuminating the fact that everyone is now (in) *Big Brother.* A perfusion of Superego into the masses, with everyone gripped in the contemplation of the perfect crime—which has now become a genuine Olympic contest, or the latest version of extreme sports.

The end result is the inviolable right (and desire) to be nothing and to be regarded as such. There are two ways to disappear: either you demand not to be seen (the current issue with image rights), or you fall into a feverish display of nihilist exhibitionism. One becomes nothing so as to be seen and regarded as nothing: the ultimate protection against the need to exist and the duty to be oneself. But this situation also creates the simultaneous (and contradictory) demand not to be seen and to be perpetually visible. Everybody thinks they can have it both ways, and no ethic or law can solve this dilemma of adjudicating between the unconditional right to see and the unconditional right not to be seen. A maximum of information has become one of the Rights of Man, as has forced visibility, overexposure in the light of information.

The worst thing about this shameless obscenity is the forced participation, the automatic complicity of the spectator, which is a case of genuine blackmail. The obvious goal of this kind of operation is the servility of its victims, but it is a willing servility, the servility of those who take pleasure in the pain and humiliation inflicted upon them. Everybody must participate in this fundamental rule of society: interactive exclusion. What could be better! Everything universally agreed upon and eagerly consumed.

So if everything ends in visibility—which, similar to the concept of heat in energy theory, is the most degraded form of existence—the point is still to make the loss of all symbolic space, the extreme disenchantment with life, an object of contemplation, paralysis [*sidération*], and perverse desire. "Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" (Benjamin).

Everywhere the experimental takes over the real and the imaginary. Everywhere we are inoculated with the protocols of science and verification. Everywhere we are preoccupied—using the camera as a scalpel, and without recourse to any symbolic language or context—with dissecting and vivisecting all social or human relations. Everything belonging to the order of secrecy must fall into the visible domain, into compulsory visibility.

In *Leaving Las Vegas*, a blonde woman is seen matter-of-factly peeing while she keeps on talking, indifferent to everything going on around her. A perfectly useless scene,

which ostensibly says that nothing is excluded in the dissolve from reality to fiction, that everything is amenable to visibility, to this visual and sensual free-for-all. Such is transparency: the takeoff of all reality into the visual orbit (of representation—but is it still representation?). The obscene is any kind of needless visibility, without necessity, desire, or consequence. It is anything that encroaches upon the very rare and precious realm of appearances.

Loft Story [the French adaptation of *Big Brother*] has become a universal concept: a combination of amusement park, concentration camp, ghetto, *No Exit* and *The Exterminating Angel*. The show is about voluntary seclusion, intestinal constriction. What sets it apart is that it is not fiction or reality: it is experimental, a laboratory for sociality, for synthetic intimacy, for a genetically engineered society.

In this sense, *Loft Story* is similar to Disneyland, an artificial microcosm that gives the illusion of a real world, a world out there, whereas they are both mirror images of one another. All of the United States is (in) Disneyland—we are all inside *Loft Story*. No need to enter reality's "virtual double," as we are already in it. No more distinction or discrimination, as is somewhat the case in art today, which is like a fractal or holographic detail of the global reality. No more exception, only interactive immersion (or submersion) in art, which is now a mere interface, even though it apes difference and makes an exhibition of itself. Even in our most mundane activities, we are deep inside a type of experimental reality. We are already synthetic, sociogenetically engineered images.

A double symbolic murder: everything today takes the form of an image, while the real disappears behind the profusion of images. But

we forget that the image also disappears under the weight of reality. Most of the time the image is deprived of its uniqueness, of its own existence as an image, doomed to a shameless collusion with the real. The violence committed by the image is largely offset by the violence done to the image—its role in documentation, evidence, messages (including those of misery and violence), as well as its various moral, educational, political, commercial uses. Gone is the destiny of the image as a fatal and yet vital illusion.

The Byzantine Iconoclasts wanted to destroy images to tear down their meaning. Today, appearances to the contrary, we are still iconoclasts: we destroy images by overburdening them with meaning. We kill images with meaning. Borges's "Fauna of Mirrors" draws on the idea that behind every resemblance or representation is a vanquished enemy, a defeated singularity, a dead object. The Iconoclasts really understood this idea well when they sensed that icons are

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a way of making God disappear (or is it God himself who chooses to disappear behind images?).

Nevertheless, it is not God who disappears behind our images today, but us. No danger of anyone stealing our image or forcing us to reveal a secret: we simply don't have any. We no longer have anything to hide. This signifies both our ultimate morality and our total obscenity.

The bulk of media or photographic images today portray only human violence and misery. But the more meaning this misery and violence is granted, the less troubling it becomes. It's a total non-sense, the very opposite sense of meaning. For us to be directly affected by its content, the image has to move us, impose on us its peculiar language (once again, the image is more important than what it means). If transference to the real is to occur, there must be a definite counter-transference of the image.

Violence and misery are now little more than an advertising gimmick. [Benetton in-house photographer] Toscani uses fashion to draw a link between sex and AIDS, or death and war—and why not? Advertising misfortune is no less obscene than advertising happiness. But only on one condition: that you show the violence of advertising itself, the violence of fashion, the violence of the medium—especially since people in advertising are quite incapable of doing it. In a sense, even fashion and high society offer a spectacle of death. World suffering is just as legible in a shapely female model as in the skeletal remains of an African man. It's the same cruelty everywhere, if one knows what to look for.

Besides, "realist" photography doesn't capture *what is*, but *what shouldn't be* or exist from a moral or humanitarian standpoint, like misery and death (while still making aesthetic, commercial, and clearly immoral use of this misery). Behind their so-called "objectivity," photographic images are the witness of a profound denial of the real, but simultaneously of a denial of the image, from now on summoned to represent what refuses to be represented, summoned to rape the real by forced entry.

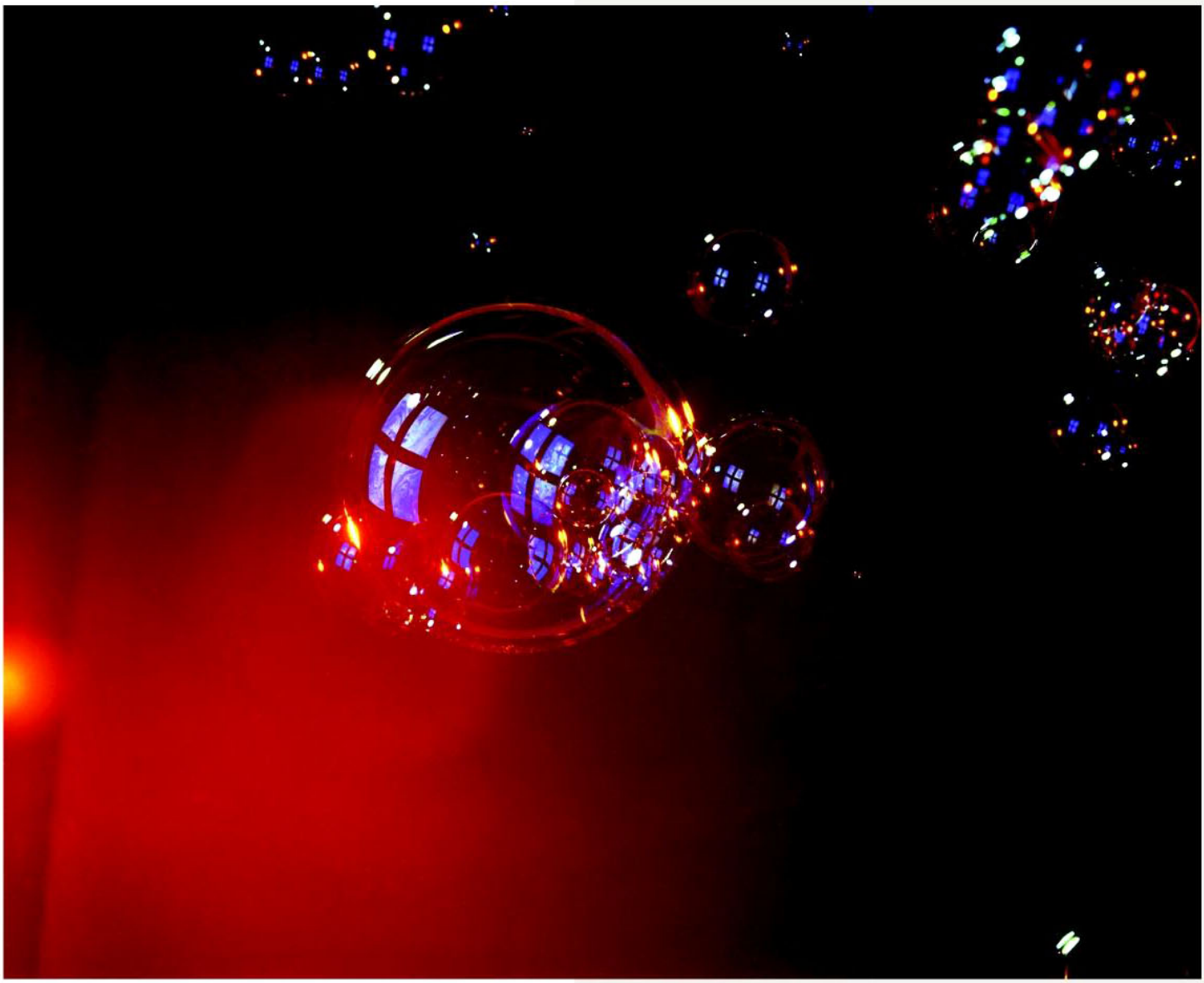
The final (and definitive) violence against the image concerns all the new media imaging technologies. The emergence *ex nihilo*, via digital manipulation and fakery, of all the many news pictures and reports: gone is the very imagination of the image, its "optical illusion," since in this synthetic operation the referent no longer exists, nor is there in fact any time for reality to take hold when it straight away becomes virtual. No more direct capture in the image, no immediate access to a real object once and for all time, from which the photograph and the image in general derive their magical illusion, as a kind of "acting out" or unique event—the last glimmer of reality in a world devoted to the hyperreal. No more "pinpoint" exactitude in the virtual image, no more "*punctum* in time" (to quote Roland Barthes), as was the case with the analogue image. Not so very long ago, as Barthes says, the photograph testified to something having once existed that is no more, hence to a permanent absence full of nostalgia (for the "that-has-been"). Today, however, the photograph is full of nostalgia for presence, since it is the sole remaining proof of the subject's presence before an object. This is the ultimate challenge for the invasion of digital images to come.

The relationship between the image and its referent already poses enough problems concerning representation on its own. But when the referent totally disappears, when there is no longer any representation properly speaking, when the real object vanishes in image processing, when the pure image-artifact no longer reflects anything or any person, nor even passes through a negative stage—can we still speak of the image? Very soon now there won't be images, and even their consumption will become virtual. If, as Plato says, "the image stands at the junction of a light that comes from the object and another which comes from the gaze," soon there will be no object, gaze, or image at all. All this has a tragic dimension, but it also explains the pathetic measure of success the uniquely photographic image and process have recently enjoyed—their artificial resurrection, as is the case with all species on the verge of extinction.

This is how the real ironically takes revenge on the image. The latter, once the scene of the disappearance of the real, founders in turn under the weight of the market, speculation, and fashion, under the weight of the technological, economic, and aesthetic principle.

Do alternative kinds of images still exist, uniquely equipped to escape this symbolic double murder, this double violence—the violence images commit and the violence they endure? Images resistant to the violence of information and communication and capable of restoring, beyond forced meaning and aesthetic diversion, the pure event of the image?

This, for me, is the crucial issue in photography today. The idea is to resist the noise, the endless murmuring of the world by mobilizing photography's silence; to resist movement, flow, and speed by using its stillness; to resist the explosion of information by brandishing its secrecy; and to resist the moral imperative of meaning by silencing its signification. What must be challenged above all is the automatic overflow of images and their endless succession, which is obliterated by the "poignant" [literally, piercing] detail of the object, its *punctum*, but also by the very moment of photography, one immediately past, thus always nostalgic. The flow of images produced and erased in "real time" is indifferent to the third dimension of the image, which is time itself. The visual flux knows only change, not becoming, and the image is no longer given the time to become an image. For the object to surface, it must



nonetheless be "suspended," put into suspense, in abeyance of meaning, which can only happen when the rowdy proceedings of the world are stopped. It must be grasped in the incredibly brief moment of first contact, when things have not yet noticed we are there, when they have not yet been arranged in analytical order, when our absence has not yet dissipated. But this moment is an ephemeral one, gone as soon it appears. To see it, one must not be there. It is the same in a sense with the photographer, who when concealed behind his lens disappears as well. This is the penalty for making the object appear: the disappearance of the subject.

Such a phenomenology of absence is usually impossible to achieve, because the subject eclipses the object as if it were a blinding shaft of light, just as ideology, aesthetics, politics, and references to other images eclipse the literal function of the image. Most images tirelessly tell stories, disrupting the silent signification of their objects. We must raise the curtain on everything that interferes with or masks the primal scene of the image. The photograph helps us filter out the glare of the subject, allowing the object to work its magic on us, be it black or white.

Photography also permits a technical austerity of the gaze (through the camera lens), which can protect the object from aesthetic transfiguration and the influence of art. A certain detachment is required for this gaze to capture the unforced apparition of things. It does not seek to probe or analyze "reality." Rather, the gaze is "literally" applied on the surface of things to illuminate their appear-

PATTERSON BECKWITH, *UNTITLED (BUBBLES VII)*, 2006.

ance as fragments. They appear only for the briefest time, immediately followed by their disappearance.

But whatever photographic technique is used, one thing always remains: the light. After all, "photo-graphy" is only the writing of [or with] light. Light fills the void and the object does the rest—or at least half of it.

So let us follow the lead of the object itself. The photographic object looks at you, but it doesn't see you, fathom you, or give you meaning. It looks at you in silence, the same silence that appears in the photograph. It regards you, that is, ponders you, just as the image (which is itself an object, but a very special kind) ponders you from the depths of its silence—silence as a metaphor for secrecy, or anything unknown: an allegory of the world beyond. We see the photograph as a mirror of our world, but it really banishes our world by the fiction of instantaneous representation—not its representation as such, which always sides with reality. The real issue in photography concerns knowing how to keep something in the dark, how to keep silent, but doing it with images.

There is also a textual form of silence. The text that lets language have its say (like the photograph that lets the image have its say to the exclusion of everything else) is bathed in silence. The silence that cuts through appearances like a knife, for which there are many parallels in history and politics. Certain events attract silence, despite these rather noisy times. Certain events command silence and invoke stillness.

To picture the image in its pure state, it is necessary to recall a basic fact: the image is a two-dimensional world, complete unto itself, and resistant to anything three-dimensional, like the real and representation, which are incomplete worlds. It is a parallel universe, a bottomless void, from which most of its charm and essence derives. Anything that adds a third dimension to the image (relief, time, history, sound, movement, ideas, meaning), anything in fact that reconciles it with the real and representation, is a violence that destroys it as a parallel universe.

Every supplementary dimension invalidates the preceding ones. The third dimension invalidates the second. As for the fourth dimension (the virtual dimension, digitized and integrated reality—the future destiny of the image), it invalidates all the dimensions: it is a dimensionless hyperspace, that of our screens, where the image per se no longer exists.

The photographic image is the purest of all, because it doesn't simulate time or movement and keeps to the most rigorous unreality. All the other images (cinema, video, computer-generated, etc.) are merely attenuated forms of the pure image and its break with reality.

How intense the image is depends on the strength of its denial of the real, its invocation of another world. To make an image of an object involves stripping away all its dimensions one by one: weight, relief, smell, depth, time, continuity, and meaning of course. This disembodiment is the very source of the image's power to fascinate, its ability to shine through with the naked essence of the object [*devient médium de l'objectalité pure*], its transparency to a subtler kind of seduction. The commonly observed attempt to add back in all these dimensions one by one—relief, movement, ideas, messages, desire—in order to produce something better or more real, namely more counterfeit, is utter nonsense. Technology and aesthetics are thus hoisted by their own petard.

Instead of opening itself up to every dimension—to meaning, reality, art—any object (image, fragment, thought) is only truly singular if it is, in Rothko's inspired words, "open and shut to the world at the same time."

[As the eighteenth-century German scientist and aphorist Georg Christoph] Lichtenberg [wrote in one of his "waste books"]: "He could split a thought which everyone considered simple into seven others, as a prism splits

PATTERSON BECKWITH, *UNTITLED (RAPID SEEING BY MEANS OF THE FIXATION OF MOVEMENTS IN THE SHORTEST POSSIBLE TIME: SNAPSHOTS)*, 2006, C-PRINT, 16 X 20 IN.

sunlight; and each one of them always surpassed the one before. And then, another time he could collect a number of thoughts and produce the whiteness of sunlight, where others saw nothing but motley confusion."

Something similar occurs when the photographer removes his object from sight, since he gets to disappear himself. That is what gives photography its magical property. In this respect, an allegory comes to mind. Have you noticed that God is always absent from photographs? And why is that? Because it's him, the photographer! That's why he ends up fading from sight and leaving the world to its own poetic devices.

So what we are dealing with is a kind of metamorphosis (or perhaps anamorphosis) of thought, thanks to which the image escapes all discourse and enters a fabled land. That is, it isn't true or real, but something literally told, existing only in the saying of it, in its word, its literal myth.

The purest form of the photographic image can be found in the many fables, which are strictly tales about saving appearances. And because the image is a fable, a fairytale snapshot, it shows us a glimpse of a "real" world always at risk of losing its meaning or reality, and so might as easily do without them if only we could accept it (if only we could accept nothing rather than something). Unless it refers to those few images or fables where the void manages to break through, those living non-places of conceptual disintegration, in which the obligation to think no longer applies. And yet they still leave a trace of this void, still glorify this disappearance, just as myth—the primal crime against reality—glorifies and leaves a trace of origins.

This coming into and going out of appearance [*Ce jeu de l'absence et de la transparition*] is thus the secret rule of the image. The anamorphosis, evanescence of the object, content, or meaning occurs through, and in the depths of the [image] form. In principle, the operator has nothing to do with it. The dream of images is for them to come forth on their own, similar to Warhol's automatism—the automatism of dream itself (though one might regret not having a digital camera to capture some beautiful images).

From this perspective, the image's secret rule of disappearance and reappearance [*transparition*] has a close connection to theory. It is the silent consecration of all that which, having been put into words and thus exhausted in discourse, has necessarily metamorphosed into something else. And the most beautiful metamorphosis of discourse is the image.

The image fundamentally has nothing to do with discourse, even if it seems to have preceded it in an earlier life. In any event, theory taken to extremes becomes faceless, becomes its very own mask. It retains every appearance of analysis, but it has secretly passed to the other side, to the dimension of phenomena, where there is nothing more to say. That's when the image appears and reveals its phenomenal power. The image is born of this phenomenal intuition of the world, subsequent to the analytical intuition—not as a transcription, but transmutation of theory. So the photograph is nothing like art or the creative act, but rather the becoming-image of the object, the becoming-image of thought, both the symbolic end of the line for the analytical process and its perfect resolution in an object that isn't real or objective but only exists for itself. As soon as it is photographed, the object ceases to be a problem: it is the immediate solution to everything insoluble from the analytical point of view. Mutation, metamorphosis, even anamorphosis: a poetic transference of the analytical session. The *punctum* in the depths of the image becomes the counterpoint [*contrapunctum*] of theory.

Translated by Paul Foss

***JEAN BAUDRILLARD** (1929-2007) was a French cultural theorist, sociologist, philosopher, political commentator, and photographer. His numerous publications include* The System of Objects *(1968),* Forget Foucault *(1977),* Seduction *(1979),* Fatal Strategies *(1983),* The Gulf War Did Not Take Place *(1991) and* The Conspiracy of Art *(2005). PAUL FOSS is the publisher of* artUS. ***PATTERSON BECKWITH** is an artist based in New York. The photography reproduced here is courtesy of the artist and Daniel Hug Gallery, Los Angeles.*

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